

dear doctor

SCOTT R. SERBIN, M.D.

Lifting weights can be fun, safe for children

Q Is it OK for my 13-year-old to begin a weightlifting program?

A The subject of weightlifting in youth has been mired in controversy for years. Many believe that until a child has fully matured physically, there will be no benefit from weight training. Others state that is too dangerous for immature bodies, with particular concern about damage to open growth plates in bones.

In fact, researchers have found that weight training in children can be both effective and safe. Studies have shown that youth as young as 6 years old can show strength gains from a properly designed program. In addition, enhanced bone mineral density, increased interest in physical activity in overweight children, enhanced motor performance skills, improved psychological profile, improved blood lipid profile, enhanced body composition and improved sport performance have all been shown to result from youth strength training programs.

The chief concern has always been, is it safe? There is no scientific evidence to suggest that the risks and concerns associated with youth strength training are greater than those of other sports and recreational activities in which children

regularly participate. An excess risk of growth plate injury in children's young bones has not been demonstrated.

Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American College of Sports Medicine endorse weightlifting in youth. They both caution that weight-training programs for children should be adequately supervised and that equipment should be youth-sized. Programs should stress proper form and technique emphasizing lower weights and higher repetitions. Overhead lifts, maximum lifts and difficult maneuvers such as squats are discouraged.

Weight training can be a very positive activity for youth, with many physical and psychological benefits. However, a child should not be coerced into this sport any more than any other sport. If it is not enjoyable for the child, he or she certainly won't stick with it or receive the many reported benefits.

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Have a brief question? Write to "Dear Doctor," Allegheny County Medical Society, 713 Ridge Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15212 or e-mail acms@acms.org. Individual responses will not be provided. This column acts as an overview; see your physician for diagnosis.
